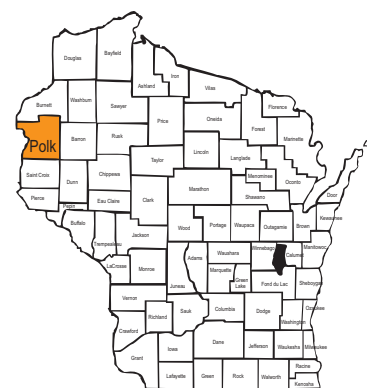


On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Plenty to Polk Around For Northwest county an outdoor paradise

By Dick Ellis

Wisconsin guide Dave Hraychuck positioned the boat for another drift across the small Polk County Lake where big bluegills and crappies had refused to leave us alone since we launched 30 minutes before. There wasn't much to this great fishing: pitch out the light line and tear drop jig topped with a waxie or two, drift on waves growing in the face of high winds and a nasty storm moving north through Wisconsin, set the hook and bring up another beautiful panfish destined for the skillet.

"We'll have to make sure we count fish if you want to target perch too on Butternut Lake," he said. "I know we'll have the same fast action on perch as we're having here with these gills and crappie."

We never made it to Butternut. But as a traveling outdoor writer, I'm plain lucky

when my assignment allows me to meet expert anglers and hunters who know their own local waters or fields like the back of their hand. When I met Hraychuck in Polk County October 25 to target fall bluegills and crappie, gain an introduction to a spring-fed trout pond and learn quite a bit more about what else is out here worth Polk-ing around for, I felt Lottery-lucky. We caught a jackpot of big panfish in 90 minutes and I'm willing to bet that Hraychuck could have introduced me to any species of fish or game found here, if we only had the time.

In answer to my call seeking fishing information, Sue Mathews, Director of the Polk County Information Center, introduced me to Hraychuck, retired from a 22-year enforcement career as a sergeant of detectives in Vilas County and several years as the police chief in the small, laid



Ninety minutes of play in Polk County targeting bluegills and crappie October 25 with Wisconsin Guide Dave Hraychuck meant fabulous fishing. Hraychuck said equally fast and furious action on big fish would have been almost assured had Ellis and the guide chosen to target perch on another lake.

Polk County: Something For The Entire Family

According to Sue Mathews, Director of the Polk County Information Center, Polk County rests on the Minnesota border in northwest Wisconsin with 431 lakes offering smallmouth and largemouth bass, walleye, musky, pike and panfish angling. 36 trout streams covering 98 miles also provide isolation and great fishing. The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is a national park and Wisconsin treasure painted by high cliffs and deep river gorges where boats move up and down on spectacular scenic tours.

"Up here where the Information Center is located in the border town of St. Croix Falls the river is narrower and people canoe, kayak and use small motors more," Mathews said.

"South of us the river is wider. The bigger boats use that more. But we do have paddle-wheel boats right here at the cliffs, in fact they start here." Mathews said.

She said although the county is a hunting and fishing paradise, several bicycle and ATV trails, including the 98-mile Gandy Dancer recreational trail following the old Minneapolis, St. Paul and Sault Ste. Marie railroad grade from St. Croix Falls north to Superior calls other outdoor enthusiasts. Railroad history is remembered in the name 'Gandy Dancer', she said. Hand crews, who built and maintained the tracks, used railroad tools manufactured by the Chicago-based Gandy Tool Company, often using vocal and

mechanical cadences to synchronize the swinging of their hand tools or the movement of their feet. The trail begins at St. Croix Falls and passes through Centuria, Milton, Luck, Frederic and Lewis.

"The short distances between these towns makes the Gandy Dancer Trail the most user friendly trail in the Midwest with easy access to food and lodging," Mathews said. "Trail users visit the restored railroad depot and area museum in Frederic or include a side trip to the Interstate Park along the St. Croix River. But we have so much here, including attractions for the entire family like Fawn Doe Rosa, an animal farm with everything from deer to wolves. But there is so much more."



Wisconsin Guide Dave Hraychuck show off another nice fall crappie taken October 25th on one of scores of lakes he fishes in Polk County. Action was fast and furious for bluegill and crappie. (Ellis)



A very typical bluegill taken during 90 minutes of non-stop action in Polk County October 25th with Wisconsin guide Dave Hraychuck. (Ellis)

“But if people just want to catch fish, we’ll put them on bluegills, crappie and perch anytime. This is a premiere area of the state for bluegills and crappie. There are eight to 10 lakes here where we catch perch regularly from nine to 12 inches and occasional catch the 13 and 14 inch perch.”


We targeted the fish with ultralight rods, four pound line and ice fishing rat finkies. Hraychuck suggests tipping the jig with a piece of crawler, Gulp Bait, or like we did, with two wax worms. Fish the depth where you find them, he said.

Simply stated, I never had better fishing for blue gills and crappies than I found under Hraychuck’s guidance. If we waited more than 30 seconds for a hit, that was a long wait and the fish almost without exception were excellent size. After 90 minutes on the water and a cooler full of filets, we moved to one of the spring fed trout lakes where Hraychuck had caught a 24-inch rainbow the day before.

“Polk County has excellent trout fishing on streams and lakes,” he said. “You can’t keep anything over 12 inches on many of the streams so catching a 18 or 19 inch brown is not unusual. There’s natural reproduction and trout are also stocked from fingerlings to brood stock. Some of our lakes are open now into March, so there is also great ice fishing opportunities. Catching trout through the ice is great fun and we have it right here.”

“I guess I’m trading passions,” he said. “Law enforcement for hunting, fishing and trapping in Polk County. I like to volunteer a lot so I can help pass on our hunting and fishing heritage to our youth. We’re running out of people who are missing the great experiences the outdoors gives us. And this is a neat area to find it.”

Contact Wisconsin Licensed Guide Dave Hraychuck for hunting, fishing and trapping trips at hraychuck@centurytel.net, 715-485-3362 or (cell) 715-553-0578. For information on entertainment in Polk County for the entire family, contact Sue Mathews at www.polkcountytourism.com or call 1-800-222-POLK.

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back town of Frederic. “I felt a little like Andy in Mayberry up here after Vilas County,” he said. “A big crime was when some kids road their bikes off a public pier and a couple of them left their bikes in the water.”

Hraychuck is a guide with a huge heart, specializing in family and youth trips, offering countless volunteer hours to help introduce people to hunting and fishing, and spending his own retiree hours hunting, fishing and trapping Polk and Burnett Counties. He knows what he is doing on the water. And, because the big woods of northern Wisconsin collide beautifully with agriculture in Polk County sprinkled liberally with public wildlife areas, he highly recommends the area for the Wisconsin hunter. Deer, turkey, waterfowl and upland game hunting, he said, all offer excellent opportunity.

“I didn’t know where Polk County was before I moved here with my wife, Ann (Wisconsin State Legislature representative Ann Hraychuck) but it’s a sportsmen’s paradise,” he said. “Anything you want to do as a hunter and fisherman you can find here. The sportsmen here hunt, fish and trap for everything. Deer

numbers are good, turkey hunting is great and land owners are often receptive to letting you hunt for wild pheasants after the first weekend or two of the season. Bird numbers are very good here.”

For area public hunting opportunities including ducks and geese, Hraychuck highly recommends investigating Crex Meadows Wildlife Area, Joel Marsh Wildlife Area, Rice Beds Creek Wildlife Area, the McKenzie Wildlife Area, and the Straight River Wildlife Area. Google Polk County Public Wildlife Areas or connect with the Wisconsin DNR website.

“We fish for walleye, trout, bass, panfish and northern,” he said. “The smallmouth bass fishing on the St. Croix River is excellent and the largemouth bass fishing is too on many lakes. You can expect to catch several dozen fish with 13 to 15 fish a slow day. After a DNR study they’re starting to take length limits off largemouth bass because the regulations were hurting other species. On Butternut and 12 other lakes you can take five fish with no size limit. Some lakes have a slot limit. You can’t keep bass from 14 to 18 inches. You will catch many fish in the 17 to 17-1/2 inch range. That’s absolutely a hoot.”